

VANSTONE: Roughriders' plans for 2013 must start now

BY ROB VANSTONE, LEADER-POST SEPTEMBER 30, 2011



Roughriders quarterback Darian Durant (#4) at a game held at Mosaic Stadium in Regina, Sask. on Saturday Sept. 24, 2011.

Photograph by: Michael Bell, Regina Leader-Post

REGINA -- The Saskatchewan Roughriders suddenly have another Grey Cup countdown to consider.

On a bulletin board in the Roughriders' locker room, it is prominently noted that 59 days remain until the CFL's championship game is held in Vancouver.

However, the number 786 should also be part of the collective consciousness around Mosaic Stadium.

In fewer than 800 days, the 2013 Grey Cup is to be played in Regina. Verification is expected on Oct. 13, when a gala announcement is scheduled for Casino Regina.

The Roughriders cannot afford to roll the dice in advance of that 2013 game.

At long last, the Roughriders must field a championship-calibre team with the ultimate home playoff game in mind. First and foremost, the onus is on the team to ensure that a bona-fide starting quarterback is on the roster.

Hello there, Darian Durant.

Durant has one full season — the option year of 2012 — remaining on his contract with the Roughriders. Now that the 2013 Grey Cup is on the radar, the Roughriders must intensify their efforts to guarantee that Durant is part of the equation two years from now. Otherwise, the Roughriders will risk a repeat of the inglorious past.

In 1995, when Saskatchewan staged a Grey Cup for the first time, the Roughriders could not decide whether Tom Burgess or Warren Jones was their starting quarterback. The uncertainty was a major reason why that edition of the Roughriders finished with six victories and out of the playoffs.

In 2003, the Roughriders did have two very talented quarterbacks on their roster — but didn't start either of them. Nealon Greene was the quarterback of record for most of the season, and he performed serviceably enough as Saskatchewan posted an 11-7 record and advanced to the West Division final before losing 30-23 to the host Edmonton Eskimos with a berth in a second Regina-based Grey Cup at stake.

Greene was backed up that afternoon by Kevin Glenn and Henry Burris — both of whom have become prominent CFL quarterbacks. (Whatever happened to Nealon Greene, anyway?)

With Durant in the fold, the Roughriders are in a position to finally take a run at hosting a Grey Cup game without the quarterbacking situation being a matter of intense debate.

By the time the 2013 Grey Cup rolls around, Durant will be 31 and still very much in his prime. Such a player will not be inexpensive, but the Roughriders are in a position where they cannot afford to allow Durant to eventually test free agency.

Durant's contractual situation will also have a bearing on other players and the paths they choose. Andy Fantuz, for example, is to become a free agent after this season. Although the star slotback would like to take another shot at the NFL, it is highly conceivable that most (if not all) of the overtures he receives will come from CFL teams. Given the close friendship between Durant and Fantuz, it stands to reason that the quarterback's plans will influence those of Fantuz.

Here is another factor to consider: It is virtually impossible to win a Grey Cup without an elite quarterback.

Of course, there are exceptions — such as Rick Cassata (1973 Ottawa Rough Riders), Sean Salisbury (1988 Winnipeg Blue Bombers) and Marcus Crandell (2001 Calgary Stampeders) — but marquee quarterbacks typically rule the day when Grey Cups are played.

That generality is certainly applicable to the Roughriders, whose three Grey Cup-winning quarterbacks are Ron Lancaster (1966), Kent Austin (1989) and Kerry Joseph (2007). Although Joseph was not a top-drawer CFL pivot for a prolonged period, he was named the CFL's most outstanding player as the 2007 league final loomed.

Back then, Durant was the Roughriders' third-string quarterback. He has since developed into a prolific passer — someone who was third on TSN's pre-season listing of the top 50 players in the CFL — and his best years are ahead.

By 2013, Durant could very well be most-outstanding-player material. The venerable Anthony Calvillo, if he is still playing for the Montreal Alouettes, will be 41. Burris, now of the Stampeders, will have turned 38. Their advancing age should open the door for the likes of Durant and the B.C. Lions' Travis Lulay to emerge as the CFL's pre-eminent quarterbacks.

The timing could be ideal for the Roughriders, providing that Durant is still in their employ.

Durant has made it clear on several occasions that he views his association with the Roughriders as a long-term proposition. So, with the paperwork on the 2013 Grey Cup being all but official, it will soon be time for another important deal to be consummated.

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